Proving God’s Existence

St. Anselm of Canterbury (A.D. 1033-1109), a Platonic Christian who was regarded in his day as “the second Augustine,” uniquely set the stage for the later development of modern science, in that he based all of his argument not on the authority of Scripture, but on the force of reason alone.

The first three volumes of this set (the second volume is currently out of print), include the complete writings of Anselm, and the fourth contains a number of critical essays by Jasper Hopkins. I will focus for the purpose of this review on Anselm’s proof of the existence of God as it is presented in the Proslogium and is elaborated upon in Anselm’s Reply to Gaunilon, the monk who attempted to refute Anselm’s argument in the short work entitled On Behalf of the Fool.

After thanking God for having created him in His triune image, so that he might remember, conceive, and love Him, Anselm says in Chapter II of the Proslogium that we believe God is something “than which nothing greater can be thought.” According to Anselm, even the fool who says in his heart that God does not exist, is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be thought. And yet that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, if it were only in the understanding, then it could be thought to exist also in reality—which is greater.

“Therefore, if that, than which a greater cannot be thought existed only in the understanding, then that than which a greater cannot be thought would be that than which a greater can be thought! But surely this conclusion is impossible. Hence, without doubt, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.”

Most commentators historically have focussed on the argument as developed thus far to the exclusion of what follows.

In Chapter III, Anselm argues that God exists so truly that He cannot even be thought not to exist. “For, there can be thought to exist something whose non-existence is inconceivable; and this thing is greater than anything whose non-existence is conceivable. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought could be thought not to exist, then that than which a greater cannot be thought would not be that than which a greater cannot be thought—a contradiction. Hence, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists so truly [really] that it cannot even be thought not to exist.”

Anselm continues: If a mind could conceive of something better than God, “the creature would rise above the Creator and would sit in judgment over the Creator—an utterly preposterous consequence.” Indeed, whatever else exists, except God alone, can be conceived not to exist.

In Chapter IV, Anselm argues that the fool says what cannot be conceived, that God does not exist, only insofar as he uses the word God nominally, without understanding the essence to which the word refers.

In Chapter I of his Reply to Gaunilon, Anselm clarifies that “that than which a greater cannot be thought can only be thought to exist without a beginning. Now, whatever can be thought to exist but does not exist can be thought to begin to exist.”

Thus, as Anselm argues in Chapter IV, everything, with the exception of that which exists supremely, can be thought not to exist. “Indeed, all and only things which have a beginning or an end or are composed of parts—and whatever (as I have already said) at any place or time does not exist as a whole—can be thought not to exist. But only that in which there is no conceivable beginning or end or combination of parts, and only that which exists as a whole everywhere and always, cannot be thought not to exist.”

Further History of the Argument

St. Thomas Aquinas seems to have rejected Anselm’s proof, arguing in the Summa Theologica that although the existence of God is self-evident of itself, it must nonetheless be demonstrated from the effects of his creation, since His existence is not necessarily self-evident to us.

But the brilliance of Anselm’s argument is that any rational mind created in the image of God (imago Dei) and having the capacity for God (capax Dei) is led to the existence of God as that being than which a greater cannot be conceived, because everything created, including the human mind, has a beginning and thus necessarily presupposes an Absolutely Infinite Creator. The
Creation According to Moses

Philo Judaeus of Alexandria, Egypt lived from 20 B.C. to A.D. 50. He was the Greek-Jewish philosopher who synthesized the best of Plato and the Septuagint (Hebrew Bible in Greek translation). According to Eusebius, he collaborated with Peter the Apostle in Rome.

The significance of this one-volume edition being re-issued last year in an updated version, must be seen in the historical context of both the ongoing Vatican-Jewish-Islamic dialogue against the genocidal “population control” policies promulgated at the U.N. conference in Cairo, Egypt last September, as well as the moves on the part of the Israeli and Arab leaderships, and the U.S. Clinton Administration, to establish peace in that troubled part of the world.

In numerous of his writings, Lyndon LaRouche has pointed out that we are indebted to Philo’s “A Treatise on the Account of the Creation of the World, as Given by Moses” for being the first explicit elaboration in the Judeo-Christian tradition of the concept that man is created in the image of God (imago Dei) insofar as he is capable of creativity, and that it is this creativity which distinguishes man from mere beasts. “On Creation” can thus be read as an affirmation of the outlook of Plato’s Timaeus, and as a direct attack on the contrary Aristotelian viewpoint.

As the translator Yonge points out in the Preface to the original 1859 edition, “… it appears to have been a saying among the ancients that, ‘either Plato philionises, or Philo platonises.’” We encounter Philo’s Platonist outlook throughout these works, as when he describes the difficulty of discovering and communicating truth, and its relation to creativity, in terms reminiscent of Plato’s parable of the Cave, and of the later reflection of this in St. Paul, that “we see as in a mirror darkly”: “[N]o one, whether poet or historian, could ever give expression in an adequate manner to the beauty of his ideas respecting the creation of the world; for they surpass all the power of language, and amaze our hearing, being too great and venerable to be adapted to the sense of any created being.”

Immanuel Kant concluded that God’s existence is merely a useful idea, but not provable. Kant’s criticism, like that of Gaunilo’s before him, is ultimately based upon his Aristotelian (empiricist) method, according to which only that exists, which exists contingently as an object of the senses. This method necessarily denies the existence of that which exists non-contingently.

Although Anselm’s proof and Leibniz’s attempts to improve upon it have been followed by the contributions of others, the most important contribution to this subject is found in the essay by Lyndon LaRouche entitled “On the Subject of God” (Fidelio, Vol. II, No. 1, Spring 1993).

LaRouche supplements the proofs of Plato, Augustine, Anselm, and Leibniz by applying the distinction between the Absolute Infinite and the transfinite, from which Georg Cantor derived in part, which an Absolute One, circular process, which describes the difficulty of discovering and communicating truth, and its relation to creativity, in terms reminiscent of Plato’s parable of the Cave, and of the later reflection of this in St. Paul, that “we see as in a mirror darkly”: “[N]o one, whether poet or historian, could ever give expression in an adequate manner to the beauty of his ideas respecting the creation of the world; for they surpass all the power of language, and amaze our hearing, being too great and venerable to be adapted to the sense of any created being.”

LaRouche writes that “… the hypothesizing the higher hypothesis, the highest state of mind corresponding to comprehension of Plato’s and Cantor’s Becoming, is bounded by the unchanged cause of change (for increase of potential population-density), the Good. This relationship of the lesser (Becoming) to its master (Good) parallels somewhat the bounding of the inferior species, a polygonal process, by the higher species, circular action.”

In the critical essays which appear in Volume IV, Jasper Hopkins, who later went on to translate many of the works of Nicolaus of Cusa, unfortunately is only too ready to agree with the Aristotelians who have historically attacked Anselm’s proof as “unsound.” Nonetheless, his translations of Anselm’s complete works are to be recommended as an invaluable source of the writings of a great Christian Platonist, who insisted on the primacy of the principle of intelligibility.

—William F. Wertz, Jr.